THE NEWS LETTER

OF THE COLLEGE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

Vol. V, No. 1 | UNION COLLEGE : SCHENECTADY, N.Y. | January, 1943

While We Wait . . .

The fate of the teaching of literature as one of the humanities will soon be decided. No doubt most of us sincerely believe that the complete suspension of this function would be only too much like surrendering a significant part of the cultural and intellectual freedom we must defend against Nazism; and no doubt, believing this, we should in every legitimate way act swiftly and cooperatively to protect this study as one of fundamental importance. But, under the necessities of total war, the process of adapting the liberal arts colleges from their normal responsibility of educating for life, to their emergency task of educating "for national survival" is already far advanced; and the complete suspension of literary study may be decided upon—perhaps as a corollary of some larger decision—soon and suddenly.

Without at all abandoning the hope that this may never happen, let us face for a moment the consequences of such a possibility. The suspension might last a year, or ten years, or a generation. Many of us may now be teaching our courses in literature for the last time. If it should turn out to be so, what would we wish, later, that we had done now? How should we or can we modify our teaching practices to give our students, while we can, a fuller share of our own respect for literary study, of our own rich and deep enjoyment of it?

In general we should and can, I think, narrow the gap between the instructor's expert interpretation of literature and the student's inexperienced exploration of it. In normal times we hope that the student will, through a succession of courses, eventually approach our own kind of appreciation or enthusiasm. Now there is not time to trust to such a slow process. Can we not do more right now to share our own most exciting and rewarding literary experiences with our students, by demonstrating to them how to apply and develop for themselves what they are still learning from us?

There are two specific ways in which we can, I think, do this. One is to select, within the content of our present courses, several of the best or greatest short passages for especially thoughtful consideration. Some of these we can pause to read slowly with our students, so as to show how much meaning and delight we find in them, and how we find it—for example, in the irony of Chaucer's description of himself, as he slyly continues the smooth rime royal of the Prioress's Tale right to the abrupt plunge into Sir Thopas; in the several in-

(Continued on Page 4)

PROGRAM OF ANNUAL MEETING

Hotel Edison, New York City, January 23, 1943

General Topic for the Conference:
"College English in Peace and War"

10 A. M.

Chairman, John Abbott Clark, Michigan State College.
Panel discussion: The relative importance of classical literature in the classroom. Propaganda for Democracy?
Walter Pritchard Eaton, Yale University
Fred B. Millet, Wesleyan University
William Rose Benet
Dorothy Walworth
~~Ernest Poole~~
Atwood H. Townsend, New York University.

1:00 p.m. LUNCHEON.
Toastmaster, Burges Johnson
Address, President Howard Lowry
Address, Christopher Morley, "Accelerated English"
Address, John Erskine, "What Should Teachers of English Teach?"

After the luncheon all are invited to remain, to meet the guests and one another. Several of those authors whose writings are frequently included in classroom anthologies will be guests of the Association.

AFTERNOON MEETING

Address, Harry Warfel, "English Departments and Government Plans—a Report"
General Discussion
Business Session

All teachers of English, whether or not members of CEA, are invited to attend both meetings and the luncheon.

Luncheon tickets are $1.50 (no tips). Please send check in advance with request for reservations to Donald B. Clark, 301 School of Business Bldg., Columbia University, before January 19th.

Program Committee:
Chairman, Strang Lawson, Colgate Univ.; Scully Bradley, Univ. of Pennsylvania; Ernest E. Leisy, Southern Methodist Univ.; John Abbot Clark, Michigan State College; Atwood H. Townsend, New York Univ.

Local Committee:
Chairman, Mary A. Wyman, Hunter College; Donald B. Clark, Columbia Univ.; Margaret Bryant, Brooklyn College; Martin J. Freeman, Hunter College; Margaret Schlauch, New York Univ.; W. Cabell Greet, Columbia Univ.

Room reservations at the Hotel Edison should be made as early as possible. Single rooms are from $3.00 up, double rooms from $4.50, and twin beds from $5.00 per day up.

On a College Classroom

I sit in this bleak room, all soil and age,
And watch a winter sun through dust-filmed glass
Reach to the window-sill, and drop and pass,
As quick to perish as the scholar's page:
There is the don's poor unpretentious stage,
Where he has struck his learning's sea-voiced brass
To haunt the elder hours of a class
Whose minds his mind has sweated to engage;
And here the ancient chairs where they have sat,
Where they sit still, under Arcadian suns
Unperished in imperishable skies:
Here, here horizons curve that once were flat,
Old voices speak to truth new orisons,
And beauty wakens in uncertain eyes.

Le Roy Smith Jr., University of Pennsylvania

A Teacher

I

A good teacher must know his subject. He needs to find in it large meanings and needs to master its details. He need not be a scholar, though he may well be. He is, however, master of what he teaches and why he teaches it and how to let his students into what he has.

He needs power to communicate his facts and his intangibles. He finds a way to go. He has the details, and the meaning, and he unifies these for his students (accordingly to their abilities) into a common understanding, a common if uneven grasp of what he teaches. He builds a bridge. The way he takes is not "method" got from a book or from another teacher. He gains freshness from books and from knowing another person's way, but, in the end, he is alone. He follows his own clear-cut, personal, vital path toward the vital in others.

These two seem to me the foundation. To name them is to bring up what is the basis and almost to say what is quite granted (if not always practiced.)

II

A good teacher holds to a few ideas he believes, a few guides, some constants he serves because they are to him the best. These constants will deepen, will simplify with growing wisdom. He will need, by thought, reading, watching, trying-out, to better them as his experience goes on. Anyhow, he has a few guides he follows and cannot put away unless he finds better ones.

A good teacher needs more than ideas. He needs feeling about these ideas and about his students. He needs to realize the humanity of those he teaches; they, like him, are more than holders of facts. This feeling never sags into flatness of sentimentality. It is not false, professional, or casual. It can use severity in method and can require much, but it keeps its humanity. The teacher is trying to give what is real to others who are, he judges, capable of appreciating reality.

Then, the teacher must work, in season and out, never "slothful in business." He just has to keep at it; he must hold, unendingly, to his purposes, and must, unendingly, preserve his feeling of a common and human bond.

III

A good teacher is a good man, teaching.

Percival Hunt,
University of Pittsburgh

"He who should teach men to die would at the same time teach them to live."

Montaigne, Bk. 1, chap. xviii.

THE NEWS LETTER

Editor
BURGES JOHNSON

Assistant Editor
ROBERT T. FITZHUGH
Univ. of Maryland, College Park, Md.

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Membership in the College English Association, including THE NEWS LETTER, $2.00 a year. Subscription for Libraries, $1.50.

Editorial

"Vol. V, No. 1" on the front page of this issue suggests that CEA is now a going concern. It has accomplished nothing sensational, but it has been steadily gaining strength and adding to its membership those college English teachers who consider that teaching comes first, and that research and pedagogy are supplemental. Teaching is individual rather than group business, and there must be literally thousands of good teachers who have not the slightest interest in teacher-organization; and the better teachers they are the less likely they are to be "joiners."

But when conditions arise which threaten the dignity and effectiveness of college English teaching and make it harder for the good teacher to perform his highly individual task in his best fashion, then organization suddenly proves highly desirable. This is not because it provides a "pressure group"—God forbid!—but because the conditions may be too widespread and the problems too complex for one man to face alone.

Even before our entrance into the war, the place of English in the college curriculum was under discussion, and the attack upon all of the "liberal arts" called for a well-considered and widely extended resistance. The CEA can be of service to all teachers of college English by providing a forum for exchange of views among members, and it may render an even greater service by clearing the fog from the minds of administrators.

Now that war has come and we are "all out" for victory the problems that face us are even greater. It is easy to say that all formal education must be devoted to technical subjects, and English, along with history and philosophy and the fine arts, can wait until peace comes; but interestingly enough, the men who lead our armed forces do not agree among themselves as to this. They, too, are frankly seeking the counsel of loyal and intelligent teachers. It is high time for the teachers to formulate a few definitions and reach some common conclusions and pass them along.

In these days membership in the CEA is likely to fall off for the simple reason that teachers cannot afford to pay any dues that can possibly be avoided. The membership of CEA is thus far standing by the ship most loyally. But the test is still to come. If you are a member please send your dues for 1943 ($2.00) promptly to the Treasurer. If a compromise seems desirable, mail one dollar for the half-year, thus retaining your membership in good standing, and let the Treasurer bill you for the balance at the end of April. If you are not a member, please join us on the same terms.

And make your membership articulate at once by contributing to these columns—either a letter to the editor, a comment or a suggestion however brief, or an article of not more than 1000 words.

We did it! Did what? Took the December NEWS LETTER off the press, pulled it apart, rewrote the announcement of our annual meeting, substituted new matter here and there, and got the thing out in time to reach members before any of them started for New York City and the Hotel Astor. But at what a cost! Four — count 'em — four typographical errors, several boners, such as leaving in type the request to write Professor Clark for reservations before December 25, and dropping the signature from Miss Dilla's notable list of selections for class assignment in wartime. Not to mention six more gray hairs on the unbowed head of our printer, and a certain aloofness of manner since displayed by our long-suffering linotype operator. Not to mention also a failure to reword the invitation from the "National Arts Club" for holiday week. Incidentally, that invitation still stands, as does the one from "The Players" to our visiting members. And Donald Clark still asks you to make advance reservations through him for luncheon on the 23rd.

Errata

An important article in the December "News Letter" entitled "World Literature for Today" listed a number of masterpieces for assignment in college literature classes in war-time. The list had especial value because the selections are seldom presented and too little known. Through editorial inadvertence the name of the compiler was not appended to the list, —Miss Geraldine P. Dilla of the University of Kansas City.

The Why of It

December 14, 1942

Dear Mr. Johnson:

Thank you for your communication of December 8 regarding College English Teachers Meeting in New York City on December 28.

In all fairness to you, your membership and the transportatoin industry, there is only one request we can consistently make, namely, that the Regional Meeting for College English Teachers originally scheduled for the holiday period be canceled. We make this request with the full realization that there are many important discussions included in your program, but the general transportation situation is such that many organizations similar to your own must sacrifice their meetings in the interest of the war effort.

Travel in late December is expected to reach an all-time high, and it is definitely known that the carriers will be taxed to their fullest capacity to be able to care for the traffic that is presented them. Any effort on the part of individuals or organizations which will react in a manner to reduce the burden on the carriers will be considered a definite contribution to the war effort.

I trust this letter will be received in the light in which it is written and that you can find it consistent to postpone the 1942 meeting.

Very truly yours,
H. F. McCarthy, Director,
Division of Traffic Movement

Teachers and students of literature, the social sciences, and history may be interested in a new bi-weekly magazine entitled PEOPLE'S WAR, which began publication about the end of the year. Its declared purpose is to help win the war quickly and to stimulate planning and action toward a just peace. It will be edited with the cooperation and support of such agencies as the Free World Association, the Friends of Democracy, the National Education Association, various farm and labor groups, the international Student Service, the American Newspaper Guild, the Cooperative League of the U. S. A., the Office of War Information, and the Information Services of our Allies.

PEOPLE'S WAR will appear every two weeks, about the size and style of N E W S-W E E K or the UNITED STATES NEWS. One-third of the space will be given to pictures. PEOPLE'S WAR will include original articles and feature extracts from official sources such as the underground papers of Europe.

The editors of PEOPLE'S WAR are Rev. L. M. Birckhead, National Director of Friends of Democracy; Louis Dolivet, Secretary-General of the International Free World Association; Kenneth M. Gould, editor of SCHOLASTIC; Johannes Steel, radio commentator; and Prof. Atwood H. Townsend of New York University. An Editorial Advisory Committee is being formed which already includes many distinguished names.

Fundamental for What?

How quaint the ways of paradox!
At common sense she gaily mocks!

Because it is "fundamental," all freshmen take "English," that is everything from whole-souled semantics here to half-baked sociology there, with many a theme between. Frequent composition is the common denominator of the courses, everything from exercises in fiction to drill in exposition, often at the whim of the instructor. English may be fundamental, but what English? And fundamental for what?

Because of the large enrollment in freshman English, there must be a large staff to teach it, but who are these teachers? The most experienced and competent men? They feel they have passed their apprenticeship in such work and should be relieved of even supervisory duties. Some of the younger men who are gaining recognition? Perhaps, but they are yearning for the day when they may be burdened with it no longer. The inexperienced, the candidates for degrees, the proved incompetents? Yes, how frequently, and not only because they are cheap.

Policies of promotion force the energetic and able to regard freshman teaching merely as initiation; those who are not promoted continue to teach freshmen. Moreover, the freshman English staff is too often regarded primarily as the replacement center for seminars. What wonder, then, with no agreement on the aims, methods, or materials of freshman English, with the least effective teachers assigned to it, with administrative policies of promotion and appointment stultifying it what wonder that its value and the value of "English" have come under question? English is "fundamental," but are our courses for general students? Do we justify the faith that is put in us?

R. T. F.

Bouquets

"The News Letter" continues, in my opinion, to fill an important place no other publication supplies. I thought the last issue an especially stimulating one. May nothing interrupt its useful career!

Donald C. Dorian,
New Jersey College for Women
Rutgers University

May I take this opportunity of telling you how grateful I am for each issue of "The News Letter"? My enthusiasm for it is due partly to its excellence and partly to my absolute agreement with your ideas.

Mary Lynch Johnson,
Meredith College
Raleigh, North Carolina

From Florida:

"I am emphatically continuing my membership; I was at the organization of the CEA in New York and have been active in it for some time. Please continue the NEWS LETTER; I would not like to be without it".

Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*; A Digression

(This is a spontaneous addition to an undergraduate paper attempting an interpretation of the poem named. The paper itself (not here published) is, in the opinion of the writer's instructor, a sound piece of work, vindicating the student's right to a purely personal "reaction." Furthermore, the young writer's experience as a refugee from Germany and a student in England before he entered the University of North Carolina in January, 1941, gives special point to this unsolicited defense of poetry in wartime.)

We hear a lot these days about the "significance of poetry" especcially in time of war. There are certain people who find social significance in every line of verse; who are not satisfied until they have discovered a didactic purpose in everything. They do not allow poetry for pleasure — pure and simple—but they must squeeze the juice from the grape, even though it be a raisin.

There is, on the other hand, another and much larger group whose members maintain that art, and poetry in particular, are "all right" in normal times (as a kind of aristocratic pastime of pleasure, but that, in time of war, the gentle muses must give way to the sterner gods of battle. As I was writing this paper, a friend of mine walked past, and, having found out what I was doing, he remarked with all the irony at his command: "Writing a paper on Shelley, eh? That's going to be a lot of use in the army, I'm sure!"

That remark stuck in my mind, and brought out a question that I had been asking myself for a long time. What—in fact—is the "use" of studying poetry now, when the world is in flames? Aren't we fiddling while Rome burns? I am going to be in the army before the summer — isn't this a waste of time? Shouldn't I be learning about the mechanism of a machine gun instead of interpreting the "Ode to the West Wind"?

This was probably my last English paper "for the duration," and I wanted to find an answer to a fundamental question: Was I wasting my time? Did the "Ode to the West Wind" contain anything concrete —would it help me to fight better, or was it just a beautiful soap bubble which would burst at the slightest impact? Literature is worthless if it does not hold up under the strain of time and fortune. It does not have to be didactic, or, in time of war, bellicose; but it must have a meaning for each individual, be it inspiring, discouraging, or simply edifying.

I re-read the "Ode" from that point of view, looking for a meaning for myself, and its significance became clearer than it had before. I had previously thought that Shelley had described — in beautiful fashion—the everlasting miracle of seasonal change, and had made it the source of his own message of hope. That was all. I had considered the poem through a telescope, from afar; but there was no lens in the telescope, or if there was one, it was made of ordinary glass. My impression had been that there, a hundred and twenty years ago, was a man who saw the leaves being swept away by the West Wind and wrote a poem about it. I had enjoyed reading the "Ode"—but it had had no special meaning for me. (This is beginning to sound like one of those "before and after" letters written by middle-aged women with rheumatism to the manufacturers of some remedy—"I never really enjoyed life until . . ." But please do not be misled.)

I began to consider the poem in the light of my friend's remark. I found that it expressed not only what Shelley was feeling in 1819, but what many of us are feeling in 1942. We have all heard much about the contemporary meaning of the world's great art, but most of us have taken that as just another attempt to justify the continuation of a liberal arts program in time of war. Yet here, in the "Ode," was something timeless and universal. I looked out of the window. Once more the wind was sweeping up the dead leaves in "pestilence - stricken multitudes." Were the wind and the leaves different in 1820? No. Were the problems confronting the world in 1820 very different from those that confront us today? Certainly not. Shelley thought his world was in ruins. Seasonal change is, I think, the most profound expression of the divine mystery. We find analogies to it in all branches of human endeavour. The stages of the business cycle, war and peace, joy and sorrow, destruction and reconstruction—all those follow each other as the seasons do. Mankind could not continue to exist without the assurance that spring always follows "the winter of our discontent."

Today, we read of the sweeping away of ancient institutions, of charters of liberty, of human rights —as well as of social prejudice, of hide-bound tradition. A wind is blowing through the world, and it is sweeping away the good and the bad. We do not know how long the winter will last, but we are certain that spring will come. My friend might ask: "How do you know? You might be killed in the war, and then you'd never see that spring you're talking about! Or we might lose the war." But I believe I can reply that I know because Shelley has told me. He is dead, but his wish has been fulfilled. The ashes and sparks from his unextinguished hearth have been scattered among mankind, and they are deathless.

To me, Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" is great and lasting poetry because it sings a message of hope and confidence—because it has confirmed my belief in the ultimate triumph of beauty and liberty—in the coming of the Spring of a New World.

John L. Clive,
Univ. of North Carolina

Preparing for Peace

At a time when we all are devoting our energies to the war and its problems, the thoughts of many are beginning to turn to the problems of the peace that will follow our victory. However important the winning of the war may be, the winning of the peace must not be allowed to occupy a secondary position. It would be well for teachers of English to ask themselves what they can do in this regard.

In courses in literature any study of the problems of the peace must necessarily be incidental, but there is a different situation in composition courses, particularly the introductory course for freshmen. In this course it is customary for the teacher to make writings of contemporary authors serve as models for the student, as well as stimulants for his sometimes languid flow of ideas for theme assignments. Would it not be practicable for the instructor to set up as a general theme subject the winning of the peace and have the students pursue a course of writing in this field, the fruits of which could be used in class discussions and in the writing of compositions throughout the course?

Many books have appeared upon the peace that followed the last war and the reasons for its failure, and in recent months several fine studies have been published dealing with the conditions of a just and permanent peace settlement after the present war. A selected bibliography of books suitable for freshman reading would be a help to the well-disposed instructor whose familiarity with the literature of international politics is limited. Perhaps someone with the necessary background will compile such a bibliography, preferably annotated, and make it available to us all.

Great things might be accomplished if freshmen in colleges throughout the country were made to think seriously about the requirements for a permanent peace. Certainly teachers of English would have another reason for regarding their profession as an essential one even in the midst of war.

Gilbert Macbeth,
Villanova College.

Blackout

You've drawn the curtains tight.
I may not see; you will not let me view
The one I've known for all these years
As — you.

And as we go about our work
From day to day,
I wonder why the siren sounded; what did I do
Or say ?

Some little thing, or something big?
Oh, will I hear
Before too late the signal singing out
"All Clear"?

Sister Mary Avila,
Marygrove College, Detroit.

Annual Conference on Reading Instruction

Because of war conditions, the annual Conference on Reading Instruction sponsored by the Reading Clinic staff of the School of Education, The Pennsylvania State College, at State College, Pennsylvania, will not be held in April, 1943 as previously announced. Instead, a special seminar on Differential Reading Instruction will be conducted by Dr. E. A. Betts during the week of August 9 to 16 as part of the regular summer sessions offerings. Seminar discussions will be supplemented with demonstrations. Emphasis will be placed on procedures for the study of learner needs and for meeting those needs in classroom situations. Outlines for the seminar may be secured from the Reading Clinic secretary.

Dear Editor:

Are there theological implications in this sentence from p. 5 of the News Letter for December?

5. Medieval hymns and songs, as St. Francis' Canticle of the Sun, the Dies Irae (translated posthumously by Swinburne, as well as by many others but not presented in Sir Walter Scott's fragment.)

Mary L. Wheeler

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While We Wait . . .

(Continued from Page 1)

dependent kinds of harmony, of theme and source and sound, so exquisitely blended in Milton's verses "At a Solemn Music"; in the deceptive simplicity that warns—and rewards—an alert reader of the two opening sentences of "Pride and Prejudice";—but we have each our own "bests" to draw upon. Other such passages we can assign for the most observant possible reading by the students, to let them have the satisfaction of telling, in informal class discussions or in short papers, what they have discovered for themselves — through weighing the appropriately suggestive figures of a sonnet of Sidney's; through working out the exact meanings and connotations of a poem of Donne's; through comparing the backward and forward glances at the close of "Paradise Lost"; through trying to decide to just what kind of Duty Wordsworth wrote an ode.

The second way to share our point of view with them is to eliminate, as fully as possible, all the mystery about how we work—to let them see us as merely students of literature who have already learned how to find its satisfactions without continuous guidance. We can tell them frankly that in general we rely on three aids: the historical facts about authors' lives and works; the observations of the best qualified critics; and our own thoughtful judgments. Without the first, we often could not understand how or why a particular poem or play or novel came to be written. Without the second we often could not criticize accurately and justly. We should err, for example, in judging Wyatt's versification if we did not know what our predecessors had discovered about his age's misreading of Chaucer, or in censuring Ben Johnson as a plagiarist instead of learning from other critics what literary ethics meant in his day. We can tell our students, then, what some of the best and most reliable sources of historical information and of criticism are, how others can be found, and why we habitually and open-mindedly consider what these aids offer. But we can teach them too that without the third aid—the use of our own thoughtful judgment—our critical tastes would remain undeveloped, our esthetic satisfaction would be denied.

If we do these things now as well as we can, we may hope for two effects. First, our students will be better equipped, if their formal study of literature is interrupted or terminated, to continue it by themselves for their own greater enrichment and pleasure. Second, they may acquire enough of our respect for such study to insist, even a generation from now, that it must be revived.

Donald C. Dorian,
New Jersey College for Women.

Dramatized Teaching

The course in literature was going with only moderate interest.

I conceived the idea of selecting from one or two periods in the history of English literature (e. g. Neo-Classic and Romantic) ten or more of the most interesting and influential authors and designating one member (or more) of the class for each author to impersonate him for a fixed number of weeks. (The students were encouraged to exchange assignments as they might prefer.) Then each session of the class became a gathering of the authors, each one of whom was responsible for such things as making suitable talks, carrying forward appropriate conversation with one or more of the others, answering — immediately if prepared; else at a later session—such pertinent questions as might be put to him concerning his life, works, literary relations, etc. Between class periods, letters were prepared in the form of correspondence being carried on among the authors, their readers, and their critics. I provided a shelf of well selected books to be used for "research" and did just a little coaching.

Thrilling was the result. Intelligent and enthusiastic activities, promoted largely by the students, resulted in their acquisition of knowledge far more vital and extensive than the ordinary and surely more abiding. And, happily, the teacher was relieved from the usual strain of conducting the class sessions.

Robert L. Wiggins,
Wesleyan College,
Macon, Ga.

Teacher English

"Only through improved methodology in all its phases can blitzing be attained and maintained at the optimum.

"Remember—Elimination of bottle necks and reduction of traffic friction reduces time-lag.

"Scientific organizations, improved methodology, fatigue reduction and non-economy, intends to make you intensely conscious of the successful scientific principles of decreasing time-lag.

By increasing effectiveness progressively by:—

a. Cutting the area walked in each day of eight hours in the office.
d. Decreasing unnecessary motion-minutes in each day of eight hours in the office.
f. Improving equipment and its arrangement for a fatigue-elimination.

Basic measure of increasing time lag:

a. Increasing output per man.
b. Increasing output per man-minute."

—From "A Study in Human Engineering."

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